

# The recent history of accountability in the English state school system has been one of struggle over meaning and participation

By Democratic Audit

*Recent years have seen significant changes in the realm of school accountability. Responding to [earlier debate](#) on Democratic Audit, **Andrew Wilkins** discusses the profound ideological struggles at the heart of reforms. The professionalization of school governance that comes with greater autonomy present a challenge to traditional forms of accountability and may affect engagement with important local stakeholders, he argues.*

In England it is common practice to judge the quality, equity or management in schools (or a model of schools, such as sponsored academies) according to different measures of accountability. Previous posts on Democratic Audit dealing with issues of accountability (see [Natalie Evans](#) and [Chris Waterman](#)) allude to the importance of democratic (or local) accountability. Natalie Evans, Director of the [New Schools Network](#) and advocate of free schools, appears to conflate democratic/local accountability with the consumer model of school choice. Parents exercise their preference (or 'vote') through the exercise of choice, oversubscribed schools being an indication of strong accountability/responsiveness. Chris Waterman on the other hand locates academies and free schools (i.e. schools administratively self-governing and operating outside the purview of local authority oversight) within broader trends of a democratic deficit.

Each view offers a different perspective of what might be conveyed through the meaning of democratic/local accountability. This is ideology at its purest, the historical struggle over meaning and definition of best practice, namely how should we hold schools and the people who run them to account. Accountability in other words is not anti-political or even apolitical. Rather it is struggled over through the changing nexus of economics, politics and 'professional' authority, in turn shaping 'common sense' public and moral attitudes toward education.

Accountability therefore is a slippery concept and notoriously difficult to isolate on the basis of a singular criteria, procedure or discourse. Ask someone working in a school – a headteacher, senior leadership team (SLT) member, teacher or school governor – who or what they are accountable to, and their response is likely to raise more questions than it answers. They may reply that their school is accountable to the Department for Education (DfE), Ofsted, the Local Authority (LA) and/or a board of trustees (in the case of some [Multi-Academy](#) and [Umbrella Trust](#) models for example), all of whom produce different, though not always conflicting statements, guidelines and provisos on how the school should conduct itself.

On the other hand a school may identify pupils, parents and/or the local community as the core individuals and groups to whom they are accountable. Not that these individuals and groups are always in a position to hold the school to account outside the formal boundaries of the school governing body or the board of trustees, not in any statutory sense at least. Instead the school will claim to conduct itself in a way that reflects the aspirations or needs – real or imaginary – of the people(s) they supposedly serve. The suggestion being that the meaning and practice of accountability occupies an indeterminate and contingent space historically shaped by the interests, behaviour and interventions of different public and private bodies, institutions and actors.

To simplify matters we may align accountability with the practice of securing public trust and public agreement on the equitable and fair distribution of public resources. On these terms accountability denotes the duty and responsibility of all state-funded institutions to manage themselves efficiently and equitably through public consultation and transparency, and in accordance with the law. English state education at the present time appears to fall short of fulfilling some of these obligations, as is evident by media stories from 2013: [Camden Juniors primary school](#) forced into Harris academy takeover despite overwhelming opposition from consultees, evidence of financial mismanagement at [King's Science Academy](#), Ofsted's damning report of the [Al-Madinah free school](#), parents in special needs row with [Harris academy chain](#), schools 'gaming' the system to raise their league table standing, and evidence of disengagement from competitive procurement strategies by the [Academies Education Trust](#).

Similar to Natalie Evans and Chris Waterman mentioned above, I take the concept of democratic/local accountability very seriously. I am particularly interested in mapping the role of accountability at the level of school governing bodies (see ESRC-funded project [SASE](#)). In the absence of LA oversight of some schools (though it appears the LA still performs risk assessment of most schools, including academies deemed to be failing), school governing bodies and boards of trustees constitute the new 'middle tier' (together with new proposals for [Headteacher Boards](#), HTB). And it is here that the concept of accountability intrigues me most.

In the specific case of converter and sponsor academies and many other types of state-funded independent schools, accountability today is increasingly measured against the capacity of trustees, headteachers, senior leaders and school governors to practise 'good governance'. Specifically the [DfE](#) at this time emphasize the role and responsibility of school governors in facilitating good governance through providing scrutiny of direction, enabling strategy and holding senior leaders to account; in other words, providing rigorous and regular finance, performance and risk assessment. This is a model of accountability which the DfE, Ofsted and many school governor support services (e.g. the [National Governors Association](#), NGA) appear united in promoting and supporting.

Across academies and maintained schools looking to convert to academy status, school governors are quickly coming to terms (however grudgingly in some cases) with the reality of what school autonomy implies: periodic upskilling coupled with an increased responsibility to evidence worth through internal audit and external inspection. Schools in particular are encouraged to 'professionalize' and streamline their governing bodies in order that they may survive the current 'high stakes' education environment. Professionalization may include for example prioritizing skills-based appointments, reducing governor numbers where possible, weeding out 'amateur' volunteers considered ineffectual to the 'business of schools', and ensuring school governors reorganize themselves as a response to targets, indicators and evaluations ('performativity'). The implication being that accountability at the level of school governance is the practice and effect of technical efficiency alone.

I am optimistic that these changes will not entirely rule out traditional models of stakeholder governance, that is, governance arrangements that make use of and value specialist *and* civic or local knowledge; governance arrangements which are tied to a commitment to consensus through recognition of managerial *and* non-managerial aims and perspectives. However, the optimism of the will invariably suffers under the pessimism of the intellect (to quote Gramsci). Smooth managerial oversight of the school is the order of the day. 'Good governance' demands disciplined, 'qualified' subjects with sufficient know-how and a willingness to participate (contribute, debate, scrutinize) in ways deemed relevant or practical by outside regulators and authorities. And its effects are being felt everywhere. To take one example, here is a response to a recent blog I wrote for [Modern Governor](#) on the issue of school governors and accountability. The following email was sent to me by a school governor from Devon who shall remain nameless ([unabridged, anonymized email provided here](#)):

*I have been a parent governor for nearly two years. I take the role very seriously and I will until I reach the end of my term of office (4 years) but I very much doubt that I will stay in governance on the governor (as opposed to the clerking) side of the fence. This is because my experience tells me that it is very much about 'providing rigorous and regular finance, performance and risk assessment' and not much more. Once it becomes this the old stakeholder model no longer seems relevant or appropriate, i.e. what our schools need to ensure continuous improvement are well trained and skilled governors equipped to carry out these technical roles.*

The irony of the current situation is that the government and Ofsted risk marginalizing committed individuals and groups at the same time that it wishes to drive up school governor recruitment. And it is precisely these people we need in the education system, people who think laterally, locally or outside the proverbial managerial toolbox by virtue of the fact they are *citizens* and not simply *state volunteers* ratifying and implementing government policy.

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*Note: This post represents the views of the author, and does not give the position of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before commenting. Shortlink for this post: <http://buff.ly/18Ndm0P>*

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